REVENUE ROLL REGISTERS - AN AID FOR QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF AGRARIAN HISTORY OF BIHAR IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

Dr. Surendra Gopal, Patna.

Some recent studies on 19th century history of rural Bihar have concentrated on movement of land prices, sale of land holdings and the role of zamindaris. They have been based on archival materials drawn from India and Great Britain. However, the Board of Revenue Library, Government of Bihar, Patna appears to have been ignored. The library contains primary sources which have authentic quantitative data and which can deepen and broaden our understanding of the forces at work in the rural society of the state. At the last session of the Commission I drew attention to Mouzahwar records. In this paper I would refer to Revenue Roll Registers, compiled in the nineties of the last century and preserved in the Board of Revenue library.

The Revenue Roll registers are devoted to each district. The undermentioned remarks are based upon a perusal of Vol.XI relates to Gaya district. The data have been collected under the following columns i.e. (a) Name of the Pargana, (b) Name of the estate (c) Revenue divided into instalments and finally (d) Remarks.

The first useful information to be derived is regarding the number of Zamindaris. If all the estates are added up, we can get a near accurate total of Zamindaris existing in the district. A study of Revenue rolls of each district would indicate the number of Zamindaris in the respective districts. If all of them are added up, we know the number of the Zamindaris in the province. Of course, the real total can never be determined since the process of fragmentation as well as amalgamation of the Zamindaris never ceased. From the vantage point of later day experience, it may not be wrong to assert that in areas, where there were large number of Zamindaris, the sufferings of the actual tillers of the soil were greater and along with them the state of agricultural labourers was appalling. Consequently, when political consciousness grew in course of the progress of freedom movement, such areas became centres of peasant agitation and movement. This would explain,

why the peasant movement in the state which first started in the district of Champaran under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi did not prosper there, while it became more intense in Gaya district, which had many times more Zamindaris than Champaran.[2]

If we add up the amount of revenue which was to be collected we would know the exact amount of land revenue, levied in a district. A simple arithmatical exercise would enable us to find out the total land revenue that was to be collected. For the first time, we can have an exact idea of the total amount of land revenue of the province and also its break up down to district level and even below.

The data can be used in various ways. For example, if we relate it to the total area under cultivation, we can find the incidence of taxation per unit area in each district. Similarly, if put it against the value of agricultural produce, we could learn which districts were overassessed or underassessed. In fact, the data would enable us make a comparative study of the burden of the land revenue in different districts. May be this would permit us in conjunction with other factors to make generalisations about the regional economic in balances that subsequently developed in the province. Of course, the data regarding land under cultivation and the value of crops, have to be culled from sources such as Mouzahwar records, Census reports or District Gazetteers etc.

From the information contained in the Revenue Rolls, we can also infer the size of the village. Thus the register devotes thirteen pages i.e. from P.58 to P.70 to describe the amount of revenue due from Gopalpur.[3] Obviously, the fragmentation here was much greater. But at the same time the total amount due was meagre. This would suggest that area concerned was poorly cultivated probably because of soil-conditions and lack of irrigational facility. Of course, for the confirmation of the latter two hypotheses we have to turn to other sources. In addition to this information, we can have revenue as an index for categorising the villages. The new category would reflect their relative economic prosperity or backwardness. Thus within the district itself we can identify pockets of poverty. It may serve us as a starting point of investigation

for the stress and strain to which the district might have been subjected thereafter. Another interesting piece of information to be gleaned from the Revenue Rolls concerns the timing of the payment of the revenue. The month when the land revenue is expected to be paid, are all given according to the Hindu calendar i.e. Chait, Baisakh, Sawan, Bhadon, Asadh etc. The Government was undoubtedly aware of the fact that the masses better understood the indigenous calendar than the Gregorian and hence preferred to follow the local one for the purpose in place of the official one. Furthermore, the period of payment probably followed the cropping pattern of the area and the selected months showed the time when the peasant's capacity to pay the revenue was the best.

From a perusal of the Rolls, we also find that the payment was generally made in instalments. Usually the instalments were quarterly but in certain cases they were also biannual. In rare instances they were monthly as well. May, be, the break-up was necessitated by the inability of the people to pay in one lump sum. Hence, it would not be far-fetched to surmise that the government took into account the varying local conditions, such as the crops produced, their value, and the harvesting cycle and finally the capacity of the people to pay before fixing up the time for the realization of the land revenue. Another bit of information also deserves notice.

In a number of cases, the Rolls show that the amount of revenue due is crossed in red ink and a new amount has been substituted. The sum is less than the original. For example, in Barabar Khurd Paperahi of Pargana Goh the revenue amount was decreased from Rs.300/- to Rs.202/- in 1892.[4] In another village the amount was reduced from Rs.196 as.11 only to Rs.71/-.[5] The steepest decrease is in case of Jaitipur Paranwan where the revenue demand was brought down from Rs.1116/- to Rs.55/-.[6] The remarks column mentions the reason also. The reduction was done in pursuance of a letter of the Commissioner dated 17 October 1882. The remark is written in Devanagari script but no summary of the letter of the Commissioner is given. These reductions in revenue demand probably followed appeals put in after the assessment was felt to be oppressive or beyond the capacity of the peasant to pay. Was it in some way connected

with slump in agricultural prices? In certain cases, the British government thought it wise to climb down in order contain the accumulating discontent. It is not to suggest that the British government was always responsive to the demands of the people and revised its policies to serve or protect the interest of the peasants. The exploitative character of the British rule remained unabated. The poin would be worth investigating, why the Britishers made these concessions.

FOOTNOTE REFERENCES

1. The author expresses his gratitude to Shri Hetukar Jha the Sociology Department for the help in the preparati of this paper.

2. Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, "The Land Marked In Eastern 1793-1940, IESHR, Vol. XII, Nos. 1 and 2; Ibid. "The Process of Depeasantisation in Bengal and Bihar, 1885- IHR. Vol. II, No.1.

3. Swami Sahjanand Saraswati, Kisan Sabha Ka Sansmaran, Allahabad, n.d.; Ibid., Mera Jiwan Sangharsha, Bihta,

Revenue Roll, VolXI (Gaya District), 1892, Pp.58-70.

Ibid., P.37

Ibid., P.34.

Ibid., P.37.